



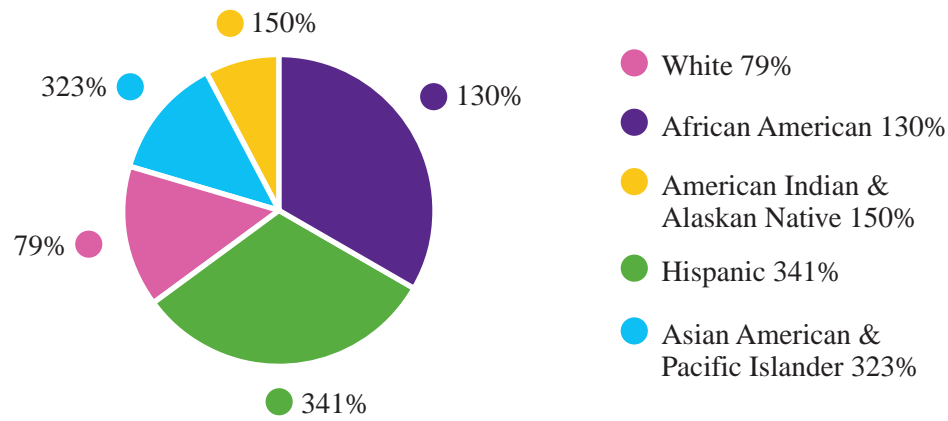
Cultural Competency

In order to enable minority older adults to enjoy equal opportunity and remain healthy, active, and independent, it is essential to use approaches and interventions that respect cultural values and beliefs and appropriately address their needs.

Growing Diverse Population

The United States is a nation with a rich mix of persons with diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. As evidenced by the chart below, this mix is becoming even more dynamic. The minority older population will triple by 2030. By then, about one quarter of the elderly population will belong to a minority racial or ethnic group. In some parts of the United States, such as California, the upsurge in the number of older minority adults will be dramatic.

Census Bureau Estimates of Population Increase



Barriers to Access

Health and other disparities that separate racial and ethnic minorities are due, in part, to problems experienced in accessing and using health and human services. One reason for this may be that service systems are not responsive to the needs of minority clients. Often services are not "culturally sensitive." Barriers may include:

- Language;
- Lack of appropriate information;
- Distrust of the mainstream delivery system;
- Low income; and
- Low education levels.

Cultural Competency Defined

Cultural competency is a set of behaviors and attitudes integrated into the practices and policies of agencies or professional service providers that enables them to understand and work effectively in cross-cultural situations. Translating and integrating knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific practices and policies applied in appropriate cultural settings can achieve cultural competence. When professionals are culturally competent, they establish positive, helping relationships that engage the client and improve the quality of services they provide.



Characteristics of Culturally Competent Service Delivery

Research shows that culturally competent service delivery entails:

- **Cultural appropriateness** – being sensitive to the cultural norms, values, and beliefs of the particular individual, the situation, and the environment as they pertain to the needs of the ethnic elder and the types of services to be utilized.
- **Cultural access** – providing information and services in languages or through media that facilitates delivery to minority elders.
- **Cultural acceptability** – Encouraging ethnic elders to actively seek services.

It is necessary to understand and adopt cultural concepts and to address structural and cultural barriers in designing culturally competent services. Therefore, service providers must appreciate not only how groups differ, but also how they are alike.

Creating Culturally Competent Programs that Work

Minority older persons need programs that emphasize service provision by staff who are culturally competent. In a society as diverse as the United States, health and social service providers and others who deliver services to older persons must be able to relate to and communicate with diverse clientele. They need to be aware of culturally influenced behaviors. Five essential elements that contribute to an organization's ability to become more culturally competent include:

1. **Valuing diversity:** Organizations must value diversity in order to establish the policies and procedures needed to become culturally competent.
2. **Having the capacity for cultural self-assessment:** Organizations must establish and understand their own identity in order to develop and implement goals.
3. **Being conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact:** How and where the services are provided are critical to service delivery.
4. **Having institutionalized cultural knowledge:** All levels of the organization must be culturally aware.
5. **Adapting service delivery based on understanding of cultural diversity:** Programs and services must be delivered in a way that reflects the culture and traditions of the people served.

Cultural Competency in Aging Services

The aging service provider network is committed to meeting the needs of a changing, more diverse, multilingual and culturally dynamic population. Several programs have been started to meet this very important challenge.

The Seattle-King County Senior Services, an Area Agency on Aging (AAA), provides funds for an ethnic dietitian for the county. The dietitian conducts focus groups and addresses the nutrition service needs of Chinese, Japanese, Cambodian, Laotian, Filipino, Hmong, Hispanic, African American, American Indian, and Samoan elder clients. The result is a program that offers culturally appropriate meals adapted from traditional production techniques. In addition, the dietitian preserves and adapts traditions and includes new scientific information to improve the lives of Seattle-King County seniors.

The Washington County Department of Aging and Veterans Services, an AAA in the State of Oregon, developed a successful bilingual and bicultural program named La Fuente de la Amistad, or the Fountain of Friendship. The AAA-trained, mostly female, Hispanic elders from the community serve as PROMOTORES or community ambassadors. The PROMOTORES teach the AAA staff about Hispanic culture. The result is culturally acceptable and accessible services such as long-term care and caregiver support. The resulting materials meet the cultural

and language needs of the elderly clients. AAA staff are also multilingual and multicultural. They have replicated the project in other parts of the State and a similar program is being considered for the Asian and Russian communities.

Working in close partnership with its sister agencies in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the AoA is the official Federal agency dedicated to policy development, planning and the delivery of supportive home and community-based services to older persons and their caregivers. The AoA works through the national aging network of 57 State Units on Aging, 655 Area Agencies on Aging, 225 Tribal and Native organizations representing 300 American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal organizations, and two organizations serving Native Hawaiians, plus thousands of service providers, adult care centers, caregivers, and volunteers. For more information about the AoA, please contact:

U.S. Administration on Aging
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20201

Phone:	(202) 619-0724
Fax:	(202) 260-1012
Email:	aoainfo@aoa.gov
Web:	www.aoa.gov

Eldercare Locator: 1-800-677-1116, Monday – Friday, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. ET